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## **Roger Silverstone (1945–2006)**

*An intellectual appreciation*

**Nick Stevenson**

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**In re-reading some** of Roger Silverstone's work to write this review I was struck by the centrality of a preoccupation with home in his writing. This is perhaps still unusual for media scholars who are better known for focusing upon public questions and social and cultural transformations. Until the advent of 'audience studies' a concern with the media tended to push the critic away from the private sphere into more public engagements. Yet like his intellectual forebear Raymond Williams and much feminist work, Silverstone's numerous contributions are an intellectual antidote to anyone who finds themselves unintentionally reifying the divisions between public and private. Perhaps this was indeed a consequence of his sense of connection to his own family or perhaps, as one of his obituaries mentions, losing his own father at an early age (Curran and Livingstone, 2006). Whatever the personal source of the concern with the richness of place and location, it is a continuous presence in Roger Silverstone's outstanding contribution to our understanding of the media of mass communication.

While there is not space here to provide a detailed review of his work, I think it is his book *Television and Everyday Life* (1994) which is most likely to be remembered by media scholars in the future. This might seem like an odd claim, given that it has probably been outsold many times over by the international bestseller *Why Study the Media?* (1999). However, while this book partially responds to many of the new agendas related to globalization and information technology with which Silverstone's work became so memorably engaged, most of his major themes can be traced back to the earlier volume. Partially against the then-dominant traditions within media studies that sought to reduce electronic communication to either questions of political economy or textual forms of analysis, his work gently insists that we understand television through the ways in which it occupies domestic settings.

Written while he was Professor of Media Studies at the University of Sussex, this work is an interdisciplinary appreciation of the ways in



which the uses and consumption of television can be connected to the routines and ordinary rituals of everyday life. In this respect, he argues that if a public sphere has constituted itself in modern society, then it is a profoundly suburban public sphere. The increasing dominance of middle-class suburban styles of living had shaped the ways in which many people interacted with television. Television then had to be adopted for a world based upon the home as a place of male relaxation and women's work. The retreat into the home away from public space in postwar society was both a way of avoiding conflict while living with 'others', and settling into the comfort of homogeneous communities. In this respect, both television and the suburbs were overwhelmingly concerned with questions of domestication and social and cultural distance. Television not only helps to create certain domestic spaces through the role that it plays within the home in helping construct a world of TV dinners and the lounge area, but much of its popular entertainment is also focused upon suburban living through popular soap operas and 'suitable' family entertainment. Television, then, is perhaps poorly understood as a place of radical possibility or as the expression of the homogeneous mass society. In this respect, many of the debates surrounding television are concerned with questions of safety and security. Here Silverstone treads a careful line between those who reduce audience studies to the semiotic productivity of the active consumer and the sweeping generalizations of those who are concerned about the politically pacifying role of the media. If the interconnections between television and the suburbs create 'a politics of defence' (Silverstone, 1994: 77), he remained concerned with how the media might become connected to more substantive concerns and agendas. These reflections would later lead into an important collection on the politics and cultures of suburban living (Silverstone, 1997). If suburbia was constructed to deal with the anxiety of Otherness, then it could only ever be partially successful in this quest, suggesting that it remains a space not so much of conformity but of ambivalence.

Yet if these concerns can be traced through a range of books and papers written throughout the 1990s, these themes would become radically reshaped in what was to become his final project. By this point, Roger Silverstone had moved to become professor at the London School of Economics (then under the directorship of Anthony Giddens), where he was soon joined by a formidable media team that included both Sonia Livingstone and Nick Couldry. It is currently hard to judge whether Silverstone's (2007) final work on media and morality will have the lasting impact of some of his other volumes. However, what is beyond question is that it is currently the major work on the relationship between the media and an emergent global civil society. Further, despite appearances to the contrary, some of his earlier themes and interests are never far from the surface.

530 Roger Silverstone's new book might, at first thought, present us with a paradox. How is it that someone so preoccupied with the domestication



of television would become so deeply connected to a debate that many currently dismiss as being overly abstract and cut away from the ways in which many ordinary citizens live and understand their lives? Surely, it could be objected, that talk of a global civil society does not exist outside of the imaginations of a few academics, the increasingly placeless global élite and a small band of dedicated campaigners such as Amnesty International or Greenpeace? Not a bit of it. In the opening pages of this remarkable book Silverstone reflects upon the voice of an Afghani blacksmith he had heard interviewed on BBC radio. This voice, commonly available to anyone tuning into the lunchtime news, tells a story of human vulnerability, war and personal suffering. Our common media lives are now awash with the sounds, images and representations offering a daily encounter with the stranger. Here, in the opening pages, it is almost as if the more positive features of globalization offer us the possibility (if only for a moment) of moving beyond the safeness of the suburbs. In this respect, our shared media space is more than the effect of the commodification strategies of media conglomerates, but is better understood as a disorderly and plural space. Such features necessarily introduce a range of cosmopolitan ethical concerns in terms of questions of justice, responsibility and respect for Otherness across the dissolvable boundaries of the nation-state. These features are not so much captured by the idea of the public sphere, but are better understood as signifying a 'mediapolis'. This is the mediated space where we can communicate, learn about others and take responsibility for one another.

At this point in the argument, Silverstone draws heavily on a timely re-reading of Hannah Arendt. It is not surprising that in these dark times many are seeking to revive Arendt's concerns, given her deliberations on the notion of republican democracy in the face of totalitarianism, imperialism and, of course, the threat of mass society. Often unjustly dismissed as a conservative critic, Silverstone seeks to rediscover through Arendt the public art of being with others. In particular, Arendt stresses the role of public judgement, responsibility and, perhaps above all, the human capacity to think as the best shield against political catastrophe. A new global political culture, then, is not brought about through a McLuhanite technological transformation, but depends upon our shared moral and intellectual capacities. The media's ability to be able to stretch relations of time and space, in particular, poses questions related to our civic imagination.

These features, reasons Silverstone, are most severely tested by the threat to complex thinking and feeling by the rhetoric of evil. In this context, Silverstone is most concerned by the way that the languages of evil seek to exclude a consideration of plurality and common humanity. Destroying our common ability for complex communication, simplistic categories of good and evil have in recent history been mobilized by both American popular culture and religious fundamentalism. However, we should be



careful should we suggest that such rhetoric has entirely colonized global mediated space. For example, Silverstone's extensive research on 'minority' media reveals not only complex patterns of identification and association, but also the continuing importance of different national media traditions. In this respect, shared cultures of national public service broadcasting can seek to preserve public cultures of inclusion where 'minority' voices are actively encouraged. Yet within the global 'mediapolis' the traditions of national public service broadcasting are unlikely to be returned to the dominant position that they once held. Mediated space resists attempts by states to regulate and order the flow of information. This does not of course mean that public forms of regulation should be abandoned, but more radically asks us to think less in terms of state regulation and more in terms of personal ethics.

Such concerns inevitably raise questions such as: could a global media become a space of justice, and how might we act responsibly as consumers as well as producers in a mediated world? Given Silverstone's earlier concerns about the domestication of the media, it is perhaps not surprising that issues related to questions of hospitality preoccupy his reflections at this point. Indeed, we cannot be hospitable towards the Other unless we have a shared sense of home. In this respect, we do not simply coexist with the stranger, but they must be more ordinarily invited into our imaginations, our domestic technologies and, of course, our homes. If suburbia tends to suggest that we keep the Other at a safe distance, then a global cosmopolitan ethics insists that we learn how to share space and take responsibility for one another. Media ethics in this re-reading becomes less about rights and more concerned with questions of duty and care. Such deliberations make little sense outside of considerations of what a good media, or indeed a good society, might look like. These concerns are also a long way from postmodern celebrations of semiotic diversity or more nationalist-driven desires to return to purer, less contaminated media flows. However, if we are to open our homes to the Other, this requires a renewed emphasis upon questions of media literacy. If, as has been widely debated, we are currently caught in the grip of a widespread decline in the quality of public life, the paradox we must face is that we are at the same time becoming increasingly globally connected. Such a situation potentially opens the question of the international regulation of the media, but perhaps more profoundly calls for a new civic project based upon media rather than book-based literacy. In a world awash with images and narratives, then, an educative emphasis needs to be placed upon our shared abilities to be able to read and interpret this world in new ways. The underpinning ethical concern that would inform such a project should be what Silverstone calls, on more than one occasion, 'proper distance' (2007: 187). This is a relationship with the mediated Other which recognizes that our moral responsibility for our direct neighbours is as important as it is for strangers.



Not surprisingly, given his recognition that we are likely to care for those closest to us, this is likely to be a demanding requirement.

I was not one of those lucky enough to have met Roger Silverstone in person. This almost happened once or twice but I always seemed to arrive just too late. Given some of the appreciations of him that I have read, he is a man who will be deeply missed by those who knew him. As I hope I have demonstrated, he has left behind him a formidable body of work and critical reflection. His final work is one of the most original texts within media and cultural studies that I have read for many years, and will undoubtedly find an audience across a number of disciplines. If he dreamt of a world where we might all learn to take responsibility for one another, he was never blind to the difficulties of such a task and of the crucial role played by the media. The subtle ways in which he was able to link the localness of our everyday investments to a sense of global transformation means that he will be a powerful voice for some time to come. His work offers a timely reminder, not only that many of our central questions are likely to remain with us over time, but how these need to be constantly rethought to meet the challenges of new times.

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## Biographical note

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